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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000300

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: TURKEY: DTP PLAYS A KURDISH LANGUAGE ELECTORAL  
CHESS MOVE

REF: A. ANKARA 285  
[1](#)B. ANKARA 291  
[1](#)C. 08 ANKARA 1676

Classified By: Acting POL Counselor Christopher Krafft for reasons 1.4(  
b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) Chairman Ahmet Turk delivered a February 24 speech in parliament in his native tongue of Kurdish, leading state-run television to immediately cut its live broadcast of the speech. Turk said that his speech was in honor of UNESCO Mother Tongue Day, and pointed out to reporters that PM Erdogan had been allowed to use Kurdish phrases during recent political rallies in the Southeast, while Kurdish MP's must refrain from using their native tongue. Most politicians and journalists interpreted the move as a pre-election political tactic designed to draw attention to the continuing limits on Kurdish speech and highlight the inaccuracy of Erdogan's attempt to portray AKP as having solved the Kurdish language problem. The Ankara Chief Prosecutor, currently conducting a preliminary investigation to determine whether to indict Turk, would have to request Parliament to lift Turk's parliamentary immunity in order to proceed with prosecution -- a move that legal contacts view as unlikely. With March 29 elections fast approaching, all await Erdogan's response to Turk's cunning -- and provocative -- political move. End summary.

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DTP Leader Speaks in Kurdish in Parliament  
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[1](#)2. (U) Turkish state-run television channel TRT-3 cut its live broadcast of the DTP parliamentary group meeting the afternoon of February 24 when DTP Chairman Ahmet Turk began to deliver his speech in Kurdish, nominally in honor of UNESCO's February 21 Mother Tongue Day. Following the official speech, Turk questioned why PM Erdogan was allowed to use Kurdish phrases during political rallies in Diyarbakir, while Kurdish MPs must refrain from using their native tongue. TRT officials released a statement explaining they had to cut the live broadcast "because using a language other than Turkish in speeches in Parliament is forbidden under the Constitution and laws."

[1](#)3. (U) Parliament Speaker Koksall Toptan quickly responded, telling reporters, "Mr. Turk's act is in violation of the Political Parties Law and the Constitution," adding that the TV station did the right thing by cutting the broadcast.

Toptan also tried to differentiate TRT-6 -- the government's new Kurdish language channel -- from this issue by noting that, "speaker assistants and stenographers in Parliament do not know the language Turk used." In this initial statement, Toptan said Parliament would not penalize Turk for defying the law. Toptan did not foreclose the possibility of judicial action. A later written statement released by the Speaker's Office set forth the various laws Turk violated, including Constitution Article 3, which states that the official language is Turkish, and Articles 3 and 81 of the Political Parties Law.

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Political Challenge to PM Erdogan  
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¶4. (C) Turk's move is widely being interpreted as a political challenge to PM Erdogan, who has been taking credit on the election campaign circuit for launching Kurdish language TRT-6 on January 1, and the general loosening of restrictions on the use of Kurdish. In recent speeches in the Southeast, Erdogan and AKP politicians have touted TRT-6 as an example of AKP's commitment to brotherhood, peace, and solving the Kurdish problem (refs A, B). DTP official Nazmi Gur told us that Turk's speech was planned in advance by DTP leaders. MP Selahattin Demirtas said on a February 24 N TV program that Turk had spoken in Kurdish to prove that the Kurdish language issue has not been resolved. Demirtas also said that DTP has no intention to continue using Kurdish in Parliament.

¶5. (U) Political parties uniformly interpreted Turk's speech

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as political showmanship. AKP Deputy Group Chair Nihat Ergun told reporters that, "it was a political move on the eve of March 29 elections." CHP MP Onur Oymen said, "We regard speaking in the mother tongue as a human rights issue but this should not be turned into a political show at Parliament." CHP's Sukru Elekdag took a more hard-line stance, declaring, "I deplore it. I expect Parliament to take necessary measures." MHP Deputy Group Chair Oktay Vural tried to appear to be taking the high road, stating, "I'm appealing to AKP and DTP to end their policy of provoking each other over the politics of ethnic identity."

¶6. (C) Most analysts saw Turk's comments as a provocative political tactic. "Sabah" columnist Muharrem Sarikaya told us that DTP decided to demonstrate to voters that Erdogan's attempt to show that AKP had solved the Kurdish language problem "was an illusion." Sarikaya believes DTP plans to use this event "as a springboard" to ratchet up tension in the weeks leading up to the March 21 Kurdish New Year, or Nevruz. He believes this strategy of "ethnic populism" may help DTP gain some votes in the Southeast, but forecloses the option of DTP ever becoming a broad-based party. "Yeni Safak's" Resul Tosan wrote that speaking in Kurdish was "a natural right" but that Turk's political speech was "a provocation during a sensitive period."

¶7. (U) Others saw Turk's remarks as a logical maneuver to pressure the government to further expand language rights. "Referans" columnist Cengiz Candar wrote that Turk executed "a very clever step." After the government inaugurated TRT-6 and the PM spoke in Kurdish, Candar wondered, "Why shouldn't Turk address his party group meeting in his own mother tongue?" The Human Rights Association released a written statement saying that the state of affairs where the government may use Kurdish whenever it likes while Kurds cannot was "black humor." The HRA appealed for the GOT to lift all restrictions on the use of non-Turkish languages, stressing that current restrictions violate the Lausanne Treaty and an array of human rights treaties.

¶8. (C) Some saw the most important aspect of this story as the relatively mild reaction in the Turkish context. "Radikal's" Murat Yetkin wrote that, "Moderate reactions to

the DTP leader's speech shows that Turkey has changed a lot in a positive way. The relatively soft approach by GOT officials to this matter comes along with a series of past events, including Turkey's plans to open an intelligence-sharing office in Erbil and the TRT's dedication of a channel to Kurdish language broadcasting." European Commission Poloff Serap Ocak told us that she was surprised there was not far greater outcry.

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DTP's Legal Limbo  
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¶9. (C) The Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor reportedly has initiated a preliminary investigation in order to determine whether to launch a formal legal case against Turk. Diyarbakir-based attorney Tahir Elci told us that if the prosecutor proceed, he is likely to base charges on provisions in the Political Parties Law that preclude use of Kurdish in political speech. He believes that it would strain legal logic to use provisions in the Anti-Terror Law and Turkish Penal Code used often in recent years to charge DTPers for using Kurdish in a manner that allegedly incited violence or assisted the PKK. According to Elci, if the prosecutor officially opens a legal case, Turk's parliamentary immunity would require the prosecutor to petition Parliament to lift the immunity. Elci said that in recent years Parliament had shelved such requests, preferring to let them sit until an accused MP's term in parliament ends. Elci noted that the incident would become evidence in the closure case that has been pending against DTP since November 2007 (ref C).

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) In contrast to DTP's previous clumsy attempts to show

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opposition to AKP by organizing demonstrations that have turned violent, Turk's speech in parliament was a cunning political move. It highlighted the weakness in PM Erdogan's recent claims on the campaign trail that he has taken bold steps to solve Kurdish language issues and bring peace to the Southeast. One morning television anchor captured the situation well, wondering aloud on the air, "So it's okay to speak Kurdish on TRT-6 but not TRT-3? With elections fast approaching all are awaiting Erdogan's response. On a broader level, the incident demonstrates how far Turkey has come in accepting Kurdish speech. In 1991, when 11 Kurdish MPs attempted to take their parliamentary oaths in Kurdish, they were escorted out of Parliament. For that and several other attempts to speak in Kurdish at political events, they were tried and convicted, and some served over a decade in prison. How the legal response to Turk's speech plays out will say a lot about how far Turkey has left to go on the road to true democratization and freedom of speech.

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Silliman